

that some readers may find in such debate occasion to take offense. I must admit to being quite surprised at receiving Claude Summers' comments; my surprise has not been lessened by rereading my essay. Implicit in Summers' letter is the proposal of an impractical burden for historical criticism, which would be sorely hampered in pursuing its scholarly aims with efficiency and grace if it had constantly to interlard discussion with reiterated disclaimer. The disavowals appropriate for a presentation to an unsophisticated student audience are likely to be more an insult than a service to the readership of *PMLA*, one of the least of whose attributes we can assume to be a grasp of historical perspective. Summers' quarrel, it would seem, is not with me, nor with the Editorial Board, but with the fourteenth century.

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### Women in 1984

To the Editor:

I found Daphne Patai's article "Gamesmanship and Androcentrism in Orwell's 1984" (*PMLA* 97 [1982]:856–70) so rewarding that I am reluctant to take exception to any aspect of her closely reasoned argument. It seems to me, however, that in making her strong case for viewing the gamesmanship in 1984 as an expression of an "essentially masculine ideology" (868), Patai does not fully examine the role women characters play in embodying alternatives to the desolate present depicted in the novel.

Patai comments that there are few "positive portrayals" of women in 1984 other than that of Julia and mentions as examples of such portrayals the singing prole woman, Winston's mother, and the mother in the film Winston sees (868). Certainly these women play very minor roles in the plot of the novel. I would maintain, however, that they do have a major thematic importance in representing, on the one hand, the only conceivable hope for the future and, on the other, the vestiges of an almost completely destroyed past that sets a standard by which the present must be judged.

The prole woman, "swollen like a fertilized fruit and grown hard and red and coarse" (Signet-NAL ed., 181) from thirty years of scrubbing and laundering but still singing as she goes about her tasks, shares with nature "the vitality which the Party did not share and could not kill" (182). Winston envisions the "same solid unconquerable figure"

throughout the world as the "mighty loins [from which] a race of conscious beings must one day come" (182). Winston and Julia—who thinks that "all children are swine" (136)—are "the dead," but the prole woman represents a life force beyond the Party's ken or control.

Although Winston also attributes to the proles inner humanity, this quality is most fully embodied in his mother. Like the young lady's keepsake album, the fragile paperweight, and the concept of tragedy, Winston's mother belongs to the past that Winston toasts with O'Brien's wine. Because she obeys "private loyalties," because "it would not have occurred to her that an action which is ineffectual thereby becomes meaningless," she represents a world where, in contrast to the present, "a completely helpless gesture, an embrace, a tear, a word spoken to a dying man" have value as an expression of an individual relationship (136). In a dream Winston recalls his mother making such a gesture, reminiscent of the embracing gesture of the woman in the film as she attempts to shield the child from bullets. When Winston snatches a bit of chocolate from his younger sister, his sister cries, and Winston's mother, unable to provide more chocolate, "drew her arm around the child and pressed its face against her breast" (135). This "enveloping, protecting gesture" seems to Winston to contain the "whole meaning" of his dream: the nobility and purity of actions that derive from the private standards of the past.

A second memory of his mother floats "uncalled" into Winston's mind while he is sitting in the Chestnut Tree Café, a memory of playing Snakes and Ladders with her by candlelight on a miserably rainy afternoon a few weeks before her disappearance. Patai contrasts this "recollection . . . of an almost idyllic time, when games were not rigged, when opposing players might take turns in winning" (865) to the "game" Winston plays with O'Brien. Surely this is a valid contrast, but the game of Snakes and Ladders is cohesive rather than competitive; it replaces the earlier contention between Winston and his mother and even includes his younger sister, who "sat propped up against a bolster, laughing because the others were laughing." Winston recalls that "for a whole afternoon, they had all been happy together" (243).

I agree with Patai that the placing of this scene is important, but for somewhat different reasons. Winston's recollection of this incident, the one totally happy memory of family life, occurs after O'Brien has exerted his full powers to make Winston "perfect" (201), to "crush him down to the point from which there is no coming back" (211). Although Winston dismisses this recollection as one

of the “false memories” that trouble him occasionally (243), the fact that he has recalled the game at all suggests that O’Brien’s methods have not been totally successful. The “few cubic centimeters” (26) inside the skull still resist complete domination of the Party; even the “victory over himself” that Winston is to win a few minutes later may yet leave a few pockets of resistance.

Assuredly, one can readily find evidence of Orwell’s condescension toward women. Just as Julia, who is only a “rebel from the waist downwards” (129), has no interest in Goldstein’s book and goes to sleep while Winston reads, the prole woman has “strong arms, a warm heart, and a fertile belly” but “no mind” (181) and Winston’s mother has not been, he assumes, “an unusual woman, still less an intelligent one” (136). In spite of the intellectual limitations Orwell attributes to women, however, he assigns them crucial roles in maintaining what he clearly regards as essential to human dignity. As Patai points out, it is Julia, rather than Winston, who first resists O’Brien’s dehumanizing demands of how they must fight against the Party (143). The prole woman and Winston’s mother carry even more important thematic weight in representing the unconquerable vitality of life itself and the private loyalties that make that life significant. If, in my view of *1984*, Orwell’s despair is not quite so absolute as Patai maintains, it is because of qualities he embodies in these women characters. Hope, if there is any hope, lies in the prole woman, and values like loyalty, fairness, and love survive, if they survive, as legacies of women like Winston’s mother.

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Reply:

Erwin Hester is surely right: there is much more to be said about the portrayals of women in *1984*. I am completing work on this subject, and my full argument will appear in my book *Orwell’s Despair: Manhood and the Path to 1984*.

I agree that Orwell views in what is for him a positive way both the prole woman, who is a vigorous and enduring breeder, and Winston’s mother, who is a self-sacrificing and protective maternal figure. But I do not see these examples as refutations of my argument; rather, such characterizations are part of the problem, not the solution. Winston’s statement that hope lies with the proles is undermined by the opposing view that there is no hope since the proles are unconscious. In various writings Orwell saw lack of consciousness as characteristic

of the oppressed: proles, natives, blacks, and—I would add—women. But, more important, Orwell’s portrayal of feminine stereotypes is part of his idealization (and misrepresentation) of the traditional family, to which he wished to see women confined. That Orwell sometimes sees women’s role within the family as positive does not contradict but indeed affirms his commitment to a society based on unequal and sexually polarized social roles.

Orwell repeatedly expresses a longing for the world of his childhood, when men were real men. This conventional definition of manhood requires traditional female roles as an opposing pole. These roles are then valorized precisely because they intensify the contrasting “masculinity” of men, which depends for its existence on a sharp differentiation from “femininity,” as Charlotte Perkins Gilman pointed out decades ago. Given Orwell’s commitment to sexual polarization, of course he is nostalgic for the idyllic days of conventional family life, replete with maternal women. He lives in a mental world peopled largely by men, with women providing the domestic background for the activities of men, breeding and rearing the next generation, and of course valorizing the masculine role by embodying a ready contrast with it.

If Orwell had ever appreciated the maternal (i.e., “female”) values in themselves, he would have addressed the issue of how to transform them from private into public values. He never does this. Instead, he admires these values from a manly distance (and primarily in working-class families, since he feels that there alone men still control their wives and children), while giving vent to petty misogyny. Orwell’s misogyny is functional within his texts: typically, incipient criticism of male protagonists is contained by means of misogynistic comments that effectively derail the reader. In addition, Orwell’s writing is full of images of anger and even violence against women in general. Early in *1984* Winston has rape and murder fantasies about Julia. Orwell’s last notebook has a fictional sketch concerning the devouring sexuality of married women, which, he says, may be due less to the appetite for pleasure than to the desire to control and humiliate their husbands. The same notebook contains another sketch expressing sadistic impulses toward a peasant-like stupid woman who is the protagonist’s mistress.

Orwell’s own attitude toward women was contradictory, but I believe that nowhere in his work—not even in the nostalgia for nurturing women that exists in *1984*—does he seriously elevate the admittedly stereotyped maternal behavior of women into the proper model for human relations. We may see this potential in the polarization that exists in